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ABSTRACT

The author states that because of recent interest in readers theatre, or concert readings, some objective methods of assessing audience response should be developed. In the first section of the paper, she provides a rationale for a critical suggestions form. The author's guidelines for an evaluation form include the use of expert judges, an adequate coverage of production items, and forced choices with unstructured comments requested and simplified methods for interpretation. In the second section, the author presents the form itself which consists of 29 items or questions classified into four categories: script; reader selection, placement, and interpretation techniques; lighting; and non-vocal sound. The judges have forced-choice selection ranging from "satisfactory to excellent" or "needs improvement or change" on each item, and is asked to make more specific comments. The author presents the procedures and results of two tests of the form, concluding that they were satisfactory. In the final section, she suggests methods of adaptation and future testing of the form. (RN)

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A CRITICAL SUGGESTIONS FORM FOR READERS THEATRE

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A CRITICAL SUGGESTIONS FORM FOR

READERS THEATRE

A happy phenomenon which disturbs those of us in the field of oral interpretation only because we cannot fully explain or control it is the recent upsurge of interest in group interpretation, variously called "staged group reading," "concert reading," or "theatre of the mind," but most often referred to as Readers Theatre. Perhaps the most striking evidence of this interest is the financial and critical success of thirteen of the Broadway Readers Theatre productions of the 'fifties and 'sixties.[1] Monroe reports that college and community interest in presenting and attending Readers Theatre productions has shown an unusual increase in the past decade.[2]

A surprised Raymond Massey said of his experience in the Broadway production of John Brown's Body that in his thirty years of stage work he had never felt such an audience reaction as he did to this "new" mediu We seem to have brought to them (the audience) the key to t too-long-locked room where they had put away their own ability to image--to see, to do, to share."[3] Very recent psychological and sociological speculation into the new role of the audience as directed by Readers Theatre techniques views Readers Theatre as a medium for fulfilling some felt socio-psychological or "imaging" need of the audience.[4] Yet we do not have to fully define that audience need in order to exploit the medium of Readers Theatre to satisfy it. Many productions have

obviously stumbled into ways of satisfying this audience "experiencing" need that unsuccessful productions have failed to find. It is the contention of the investigator that the development of a critical suggestions form for use by directors of new Readers Theatre productions can serve at least as a stopgap until, and as a transition to, relatively more objective ways of directly assessing audience response than the completely subjective and often inaccurate guesses presently employed by directors in attempting to improve production techniques. The purpose of this paper is, in the first section, to provide an introductory rationale and goals for the critical suggestions form. The second section of the paper will include the form itself and summarize an exploratory study of the use of the form. The third section will include suggestions for the further testing of the form through its practical use by Readers Theatre directors.

Rationale for the Development of the Critical Suggestions Form

Present concern of Readers Theatre with audience response

Ong asserts that the difference in rhetoric and poetic is that while rhetoric's chief concern is with audience reaction, poetic legitimately ignores the projected or actual response of its audience.[6] Accepting this distinction, we see that Readers Theatre as conceived by its theorists and directors is closer to rhetoric than to poetry.[7] Readers Theatre is indeed defined by Brooks, Henderhan, and Billings primarily in terms of audience response:

> ...the oral group reading of literary material to <u>suggest</u>,

> and not represent, the determined potential of the literature in such a way that the audience member can better fulfill that potential in his own mind.[8]

Monroe, from her survey of the history, theory, and practice of Readers Theatre, pronounces Brooks' definition representative.[9] Larson's survey, limited to current theory and practice, illustrates the concern of Readers Theatre with establishing the medium as distinct from conventional theatre, which it most closely resembles, in terms of different audience roles. In conventional theatre, production techniques represent real life for the audience, and their role is to sit and be acted upon. In Readers Theatre, production elements are suggestive only, and force the audience members to fill in "real" details from their own experience, thus mentally participating in the action.[10]

The research need

Cobin lists as a major research need the development of ways for the oral interpreter to assess the "actual effectiveness of those (techniques) he employs."[11] His survey[12] and the 1968 survey by Reynolds[13] of empirical-experimental research into oral interpretation have indicated the paucity of such studies, particularly in the area of Readers Theatre. Reynolds states, and this investigator's independent survey confirms, that attempts at developing a semantic differential and other instruments for directly assessing "lay" audience response have not yet been proven successful,[14] although psychologist Greenwald's current research into persuasiveness, including the attempted development of a technique for measuring what runs through a person's mind as

he listens to or reads a persuasive message, looks promising for oral interpretation.[15] Young in 1970 confirms that "little has been written about evaluative procedures useful for a Readers Theatre performance."[16]

The specific research need for Readers Theatre goes further than simply measuring lay audience response to production techniques in terms of a "like-dislike" reaction recorded on a scale, or some other instrument, into critical suggestions for improving the technique which was not "liked." Directors as well as theorists in Readers Theatre have called for,[17] in the words of director and original Readers Theatre playwright John Lewis Carlino,

> ...some systematic method to be used by the director in determining what changes should be made in the initial productions of Readers Theatre performances, original or adapted, to more fully utilize audience response to the production. Reaction must be guided by some suggestion to the audience, directing them to comment on certain production techniques, so as to get each person's response to each technique.[18]

However, studies by Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield in "lay audience" evaluation of films[19] and Seedorf[20] and Porter[21] in oral interpretation have shown that the lay audience tends to see the production as a gestalt, and, in general, cannot distinquish techniques sufficiently to make specific and useful suggestions to the director for the improvement of the production. Strickland's informal attempt at improving her initial

Readers Theatre production through a suggestions sheet for use by the lay audience resulted in failure. The lay audience was generally unable to comment except in terms of liking or disliking an entire production category of techniques, such as lighting, and the few specific suggestions that were made were inconsistent and could not be used to determine needed improvements.[22]

A critical suggestions form to meet the need: guidelines

Swingle concludes from experimental investigation that the most practical alternative to the use of lay audience response in improving the medium at the present time is the use of expert judges who are better trained than lay judges to isolate elements of production and suggest methods of changing those which need improvement.[23] Obviously, expert judges chosen on the basis of familiarity with Readers Theatre theory and technique, and availability, are not a random sample representative of the lay audience, except, hopefully, roughly representative in terms of a like-dislike response. Clevenger asserts that "...the critic's reaction is more likely than the reaction of any other small group to characterize how the theatre-going public will react."[24] The similarity of the like-dislike reaction of expert and inexpert audiences has been empirically tested for theatre by Mabie,[25] and for the oral interpretation of poetry and prose by Seedorf;[26] both investigators find that ranking of items shows a statistically high level of agreement between the two groups.

Following these "precedent studies" a step further in applying their results to Readers Theatre, the investigator noted Mabie's report that the use of expert judges for suggesting

production improvements has resulted in a high level of judge agreement, and that the method, roughly similar to the one the investigator proposes, "has become effective evidence about scenes that need revision."[27] The findings concerning format of Gallaway,[28] Seedorf,[29] and Porter[30] indicate that a dichotomous forced-choice technique, to force the judges to consider certain production elements and decide whether or not each needs improvement, in combination with a provision for unstructured comment as to specific suggestions for improvement, is recommended if the purpose of the form is to elicit such suggestions. As Clevenger points out, the unstructured form should be utilized when the director as user of the form is unable to anticipate response.[31]

Cobin[32] and Reynolds[33] report that at present, oral interpretation students are rarely being trained in experimental method, and so generally cannot now use complicated experimental methods. Further, Reynolds,[34] Cobin,[35] Klyn,[36] and Marcoux[37] find that a deep-seated resentment is felt by most oral interpretation specialists toward the application of experimental "scientific-objective" techniques to a "creative-subjective" medium. Therefore our consideration of the suggestions form as it should be developed, including procedure for its use, recognizes another requirement: the responses called for on the form should be such that directors usually untrained and unconvinced in experimental or statistical method can interpret them meaningfully as results.

This form, then, goes beyond the guidelines suggested by Young in his 1970 evaluation form.[38] For the reasons explained,

our guidelines include (1) the use of expert judges; (2) the adequate coverage of production items possible with expert judges; (3) forced choices, but with (4) unstructured comments called for; and (5) simplified methods of interpreting results.

The Critical Suggestions Form

Preparation and procedure

Brooks, Henderhan, and Billings call for "controlled experimentation" Readers Theatre--controlled only in the sense that vocal and visual elements of production must be suggestive rather than representative in order to have legitimate Readers Theatre.[39] Such a "limitation," however, leaves much latitude for a variety of production techniques, latitude of which directors have taken full advantage. The form must be generally applicable to all Readers Theatre productions. The investigator therefore examined semantic differential items and the techniques used in Readers Theatre productions as reported in speech and theatre professional journals, theses and dissertations, and textbooks, and developed a generally applicable form based on the findings of that survey.[40]

The suggestions form includes twenty-nine items or questions classified into four categories: script; reader selection, placement, and interpretation techniques; lighting; and non-vocal sound.[41] Questions peculiar to Readers Theatre as a medium are included in the script category, and require special explanation. The director of the Readers Theatre production usually has the responsibility for adapting and arranging already-existing literature into a Readers Theatre script, or in some cases writing

an original script for the medium.[42] This, then, is another element of production under the control of the director, and so should be an object of the judges' suggestions. A dichotomous forced-choice selection of "Satisfactory to excellent" or "Needs improvement or change" is made by the judges on each item. The judge is directed to make specific comments. There is no structuring other than the question itself to guide response.

It was anticipated that judges might consider the form too lengthy in terms of number of items and time taken for administration. However, such length is necessary to fulfill the purpose of the form as to adequate coverage of elements of production. Further, the Seedorf[43] and Porter[44] studies found that expert judges, unlike lay judges, seem to be interested enough in the medium to spend as much time as needed to write suggestions for the improvement of oral interpretation performances by individual readers. It is assumed that a similar interest will be operating in the case of a group performance in Readers Theatre. Comparison of ratings in "long" forms requiring that specific suggestions be given, and "short" forms in which no such requirement was made, as well as "internal" study of the long forms, seemed to indicate that judges were not biased on the last several questions of the long form because of time consumption.

Criteria for selecting the expert critic judges were the following: (1) the judge must have taught or taken at least one advanced "theory" course in oral interpretation which included a study of the Readers Theatre medium, and (2) the judge must have directed or read in at least one Readers Theatre production.

The judges were given the form one day in advance to enable them to become familiar with the questions and with procedure for using the form; it was given only one day in advance to help insure retention of information. Introductory material given with the form gave a brief explanation of the purpose of the suggestions form along with a notation of the time and place to appear for the test, the production being used for the test, a request to appear early so as to choose a seat among the general audience and apart from other critic judges, and the further request that neither the production nor the form be discussed with anyone else until after the test had been completed and turned in.

Testing and summary of results

The form as included here has been modified slightly, following suggestions received after the first test of the form. Tests were made at Purdue University, using experimental productions directed by graduate students in advanced classes in oral interpretation as objects of evaluation and instructors and graduate students in oral interpretation as expert judges. The judges evaluated the productions and the form itself. The original form as used by the judges was designed to answer the following questions:

1. Is there significant agreement among judges on elements of the evaluated production that need improvement?

2. To what extent do judges agree on specific changes that should be made in the production?

3. What is the attitude of participating judges toward

the use of a form instead of a completely unstructured commentary sheet?

4. What is the judges' evaluation of the specific format tested in terms of feasibility and desirability, clarity, adequate coverage of production elements, and general applicability of questions?

5. What changes are suggested by the judges to improve the questions in the form in terms of clarity, coverage of production elements, and general applicability?

The form tested satisfactorily on its first test, was modified slightly according to suggestions made for improvement of clairty, and tested very satisfactorily on a second test.[45] There was a very high level of agreement among judges on the good points of the performances as well as on general and specific suggestions for improvement or change. Surprisingly, the judges had a generally favorable attitude toward the use of the form rather than an unstructured commentary sheet. Most commented that they had previously opposed the idea of a structured form, but after seeing the form and understanding its purpose, approved the idea of such a form. Few, and only slight, modifications of the form for clarity were suggested on the first test. The modified form was deemed satisfactory in its clarity and coverage on the second test. The results of the test were positive in terms of the feasibility and desirability of the form. A sample of the form as modified is included below. Five "attitude toward the form" questions designed to answer questions 3-5 above are omitted from the sample.

SAMPLE CRITICAL SUGGESTIONS FORM FOR READERS THEATRE PRODUCTIONS

Note:

Spaces left for comments have been omitted from this sample form. The forced-choice blanks and request for comments included in question one should be used in the other questions as well; they are omitted from this sample to conserve space.

Instructions:

Please mark and write your comments on the critical suggestions form during or immediately after the performance (remaining in your seat until the form is completed) and return it to the project director before leaving the theatre. Please do not compare your reactions with those of another judge until after you have completed your evaluation form and returned it to the project director. Do not sign the form.

Please make specific comments. Use the back of the sheet if necessary.

Readers' script

1. Does the language and organization of the script promote clear recognition of the author's theme and purpose?

   Satisfactory to excellent ( )

   Needs improvement or change ( )

   Please give specific suggestions:

2. Does the organization of the script, including transitional material, make dramatic action sufficiently easy to follow?
3. Does the language style and tone seem appropriate to character and mood in each scene or passage?
4. Are the lines appropriately assigned to the various readers?

5. Is the script sufficiently "interesting" to hold attention throughout the production?
6. Is the script appropriate to the Readers Theatre medium?

Reader selection, placement and interpretation techniques:

7. Is the selection and the assignment of each reader, based upon his vocal congruity with the character or characters he suggests, appropriate?
8. Are the voice qualities of the readers appropriate to the age, sex, mental state, activity, and other attributes of the characters suggested?
9. Are the rates of the readers' voices appropriate to the age, sex, mental state, activity, and other attributes of the characters suggested?
10. Are the pitches of the readers' voices appropriate to the age, sex, mental state, activity, and other attributes of the characters suggested?
11. Are the volumes of the readers' voices appropriate to the age, sex, mental state, activity, and other attributes of the characters suggested?
12. Do articulation, volume, and other vocal elements make the lines sufficiently audible and intelligible?
13. Is the fast or slow pick-up of cues suggestive of character, character relationships, and dramatic action?
14. Are the physical appearances, including costume or dress, of the readers not distracting or incongruous with the probable audience image of the character suggested?
15. Is the placement of the readers on the stage indicative

of character relationships?

16. Is the director's selection of entrance and exit techniques used by the reader himself appropriate to the needs of the material presented and the audience?

17. Are the gross bodily movements, gesture, muscular tension and relaxation, and facial expressions of the readers suggestive of character, character relationships, and dramatic action?

18. Is the focus or "eye contact" of the readers suited to the needs of the medium and the material?

Production techniques:

Lighting:

19. Are the various degrees of visibility of characters and scenes appropriate to the needs of both audience and material?

20. Do lighting techniques (use of color, intensity, distribution on characters and stage area, etc.) aid in reinforcing theme?

21. Do lighting techniques aid in suggesting the action or movement appropriate to the material?

22. Do lighting techniques aid in suggesting character and character relationships?

23. Do lighting techniques aid in suggesting location and time of scene (a place and time within the experience of the audience, and not on-stage)?

Non-vocal sound:

24. Are the various degrees of audibility of special sound effects appropriate to the needs of both audience and material?

25. Do the sound effects aid in reinforcing theme?
26. Do the sound effects aid in suggesting dramatic action or movement?
27. Do the sound effects aid in suggesting mental states and other attributes of character?
28. Do the sound effects aid in suggesting character relationships?
29. Do the sound effects aid in suggesting location and time of scene (a place and time within the experience of the audience, and not on-stage)?

Suggestions for Further Use

The results from the tests of the critical suggestions form are so hopeful that the author offers the form for further testing and adaptation to the needs of students or Readers Theatre. The directors of the productions evaluated through use of the form have been enthusiastic about its value in terms of making needed changes in their productions. The levels of expert judge agreement enabled them to make changes with more confidence than would have otherwise been possible. The form is suggested particularly for classroom use in Readers Theatre theory and technique. The student director, and perhaps the more experienced director also, can serve their audiences by making improvements in specific productions. Perhaps expert judges could use the form to "preview" and critique a production before its presentation to a general audience. Structured comments on all elements of the production by experts can also guide the director's "experience-gain" in terms of a relatively more reliable

assessment of audience response than his own unstructured observation or that of one instructor. Through use of the form, the director can learn to more accurately anticipate problems in audience reaction before they occur, and so have better initial performances of new productions.

It is even possible that more widespread use of a form such as this one can help us toward a more mature "theory" of Readers Theatre and the values and appeal of the medium.

Notes

[1]For a detailed description of these performances and the reaction of the New York critics to them, see Keith Brooks and John E. Bielenberg, "Readers Theatre as Defined by New York Critics," Southern Speech Journal, XXIX (Summer, 1964), 288-302.

[2]Elizabeth A. Monroe, "The Group Reading of Drama: Its Essence and Aesthetic Principles" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1963), pp. 122-129.

[3]Raymond Massey, "John Brown's Body," New York Herald-Tribune (February 8, 1953), p. 33.

[4]See especially Jeré Veilleux, "A Psychological Definition of Interpretation" (unpublished paper, Purdue University, 1967), and Mary Beasley, "Introduction" to "'In the Lost Eye of God': The Development of an Original Play for Readers Theatre" (unpublished paper, Purdue University, 1968), pp. 1-15.

[5]Leslie I. Coger attempts to explain these failures on psychological grounds in "Interpreters Theatre: Theatre of the Mind," Quarterly Journal of Speech, XLIX (April, 1963), 157-164.

[6]Walter J. Ong, "The Province of Rhetoric and Poetic," The Province of Rhetoric, ed. Joseph Schwartz and John A. Rycenga (New York: Ronald Press, 1965), pp. 48-55.

[7]See, however, Keith Brooks' models showing the differences between public address and oral interpretation in "The Communicative Act of Oral Interpretation," The Communicative Arts and Sciences of Speech (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1967), pp. 302-304.

[8]Keith Brooks, Robert C. Henderhan, and Alan Billings, "A Philosophy on Readers Theatre," Speech Teacher, XII (September, 1963), 229-230.

[9]Monroe, p. 7.

[10]W. A. Larson, "An Investigation of Readers Theatre Production Style" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of North Dakota, 1964), p. 16.

[11]Martin Cobin, "[Oral Interpretation] Research: Methods, Trends, Ideas," The Communicative Arts and Sciences of Speech, ed. Keith Brooks (Columbus, Ohio: Merrill, 1967), p. 343.

[12]Ibid., pp. 332-347.

[13]Jerry D. Reynolds, "Empirical Studies in Oral Interpretation: Audience," paper read before the Oral Interpretation Interest Group of the Central States Speech Conference, Chicago, April, 1968.

[14]This contention is also independently confirmed by Theodore Clevenger, Jr., Margaret L. Clark, and G. N. Lazier, "Stability of Factor Structure in Smith's Semantic Differential for Theatre Concepts," Quarterly Journal of Speech, LII (October, 1967), 241-247. These investigators found that the semantic differential seemed to offer the greatest potential value of any method for directly measuring audience response, but that neither the leading scale in the field, the Smith scale, nor any other could be generally applied with validity and reliability.

[15]Reynolds, p. 13.

[16]Jerry Young, "Evaluating a Readers Theatre Production," Speech Teacher (January, 1970), pp. 37-42.

[17]See especially Anneke-Jan Boden, "Original Arrangement of Biblical Literature for Readers Theatre" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Denver, 1961), p. 161; Keith Brooks, Eugene Bahn, and L. L. Okey, The Communicative Act of Oral Interpretation (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1967), pp. 426-427; Letter from Paul N. Forster, Director, New Dramatists Committee, New York, April 29, 1968; Frank Galati, "Appendix" to The Locomotive (unpublished original Readers Theatre script, presented in production at the Central States Speech Conference, Evanston, Illinois, 1966), pp. 43-44; Robert C. Heise, "A Study of the Oral Interpretation of a Play as Exemplified by a Group Reading of The Relapse by Sir John Van Brough" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1960), p. 163; Letter from Miss Nelda Pierce, Assistant Director of Readers Theatre Script Contest (Fall, 1967), University of Denver, April 15, 1968 (summarizes requests from several playwrights participating in the contest for such a form); Sylvia Strickland, "A Study of the Problems Involved in a Readers Theatre Production of At Midnight on the Thirty-First of March (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of Alabama, 1957), pp. 192-193.

[18]John Lewis Carlino, Preface to "The Curse and the Cure" (original Readers Theatre play then in press) cited by Carlino in letter of April 27, 1968.

[19]Carl I. Hovland, A. A. Lumsdaine, and Fred D. Sheffield, "The Audience's Evaluation of Films," Experiments in Mass Communication, III (Princeton: University Press, 1949), 92-93.

[20]Evelyn Seedorf, "An Experimental Study of the Agreement Among Judges in Evaluating Oral Interpretation" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1947), pp. 200-201.

[21]Agnes Porter, "The Construction and Testing of a Forced-Choice Scale for Measuring Achievement in Oral Interpretation" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Ohio, 1964), p. 69.

[22]Strickland, p. 114.

[23]Edward Swingle, "Is it Possible to Measure the Effect of Oral Interpretation on the Audience?" (unpublished paper, University of Ohio, 1962), pp. 10-11.

[24]Theodore Clevenger, Jr., Audience Analysis (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), p. 78.

[25]E. C. Mabie, "The Responses of Theatre Audiences, Experimental Studies," Speech Monographs, XIX (November, 1952), 240.

[26]Seedorf, pp. 128-129.

[27]Mabie, pp. 240-241.

[28]Marian Gallaway, "An Experimental Study of the Effect of the Medium on the Manuscript of Plays," Southern Speech Journal, XXIV (Winter, 1958), 75-83.

[29]Seedorf, pp. 203-204.

[30]Porter, pp. 70-74.

[31]Clevenger, pp. 68-69.

[32]Cobin, p. 333.

[33]Reynolds, pp. 2-3.

[34]Ibid., p. 3.

[35]Cobin, pp. 333-334.

[36]Mark S. Klyn, "Potentials for Research in Oral Interpretation," Western Speech, XXIX (Spring, 1965), p. 111.

[37]J. Paul Marcoux, "An Analysis of Current Trends Concerning Certain Basic Aspects of Oral Interpretation as Evidenced in Selected Writings in the Field, 1950-1963, with Implications for Speech Education" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1964), p. 323.

[38]Young, p. 37.

[39]Brooks, Henderhan, and Billings, p. 229.

[40]See especially Chloe Armstrong and Paul Brandes, The Oral Interpretation of Literature (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), pp. 313-323; Bibliography Committee of Oral Interpretation Interest Group, "Reports of Interpretation Interest Group," (Southern Speech Journal, annual report); Brooks, pp. 303-306; Leslie I. Coger and Melvin R. White, Readers Theatre Handbook (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1967), pp. 87-221; Larson, pp. 20-120; Monroe, pp. 26-131; A Schramm, "The Semantic Differential in Oral Interpretation Research" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Ohio, 1967), pp. 109-142; Strickland, pp. 3-34, 39-163.

[41]Suggestive non-vocal sound is optional in Readers Theatre productions, although the other categories in the form are required. In making suggestions to directors for use of the final form, the investigator recommends the director's omission of that entire category from the form if non-vocal sound is not included in his production.

[42]Coger and White, 37-38.

[43]Seedorf, pp. 125-126.

[44]Porter, pp. 68-70.

[45]The details of the exploratory study were reported in a paper read by the author at the Southern Speech Communication Convention in April, 1972. The paper is available from the author on request. Statistical verification of significance of results was made by experts in that area. The chi square test was used to determine significance.